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A Glider Pilot's Story

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George Brennan flew in three major invasions during World War II: Normandy, southern France and the Netherlands. He was seriously wounded at least twice on each mission. On his last mission he was taken prisoner of war. This is his story:

In 1940, Staff Sergeant Brennan was NCOIC of armament and a rated aerial gunner for the District of Columbia Air Guard, but he dreamed of becoming a pilot. He'd passed the written tests, but a vision problem disqualified him from the training. So he was then prepared to enter Field Artillery Officer Candidate School when he heard about the glider program.

"I joined the program because they had a quick route to pilot training," he said. "But before I got in the program, the war started and the route quickly dried up."

Already with 300 logged hours of private flying time, Brennan breezed through the phases of glider training: 60 hours in light aircraft, 30 hours in small sailplanes and 60 hours in the combat glider CG-4A. But there was more. He was also trained in hand-to-hand combat and fighting with enemy weapons.

"The physical and weapons training was critical because we knew that we'd always land behind enemy lines," Brennan said.. We knew that once we landed we'd stop being pilots and start being infantry. Because a glider pilot can't go out the way he came in."

Brennan knew what they were asking the glider pilots to do. "In those days we didn't have aircraft or helicopters to carry troops or large weapons or supplies into battle. So that job fell to the us. We were towed by a C-46 or 47 at 120 mph and below 1,000 feet. We'd be loaded with jeeps or troops or engineering equipment and we'd fly right over the enemy. We were big targets in the sky."

Both Brennan's brothers, one a parachute infantry commander and the other a field attalion commander, knew the risks of glider pilots and thought their brother was making a big mistake. They tried to get their mother to talk George out of it, but he wouldn't listen.



“It was exciting,” he said. “I didn’t want to fight the war behind a desk.”

Normandy

“I got religion on the Normandy mission.”

“D-Day was supposed to be June 5 but the weather was too bad, so it was changed to the next day. I remember that I was disappointed. We all knew what the Germans were doing in the concentration camps. So when the crusade started to liberate Europe from the Nazi hordes, we were all eager.”

The first paratroopers, including Brennan’s younger brother, jumped at night. The first gliders landed in complete darkness the next morning. It was a disaster.

“The intelligence we were given was incredibly bad. We were told that the trees were no more than 20 feet high and you could fly right through the hedge rows. It turns out the trees were more than 40 feet high and the hedge rows were actually stone walls that had shrubs grown up around them. There was also Rommel Asparagus in our landing zones that we didn’t know about. That was a bunch of poles stuck in the ground all connected by wires. They put grenades and explosives in the wires and we flew right into them. A lot of men got killed on that first landing because of that intelligence.”

Brennan was originally supposed to fly in the first lift, but his troops, members of the 325th Glider Infantry, had different objectives so they didn’t leave until daylight. The casualties for that lift were also extremely high.

“Those that landed in the dark had the protection of darkness but they had to contend with the trees and hedge rows. We flew in daylight, but the Germans could see us,” Brennan said.

“We landed in a field and were sitting ducks for small artillery and small arms fire. We piled out and this captain said, ‘Get over by the hedge rows and dig in.’ Well everybody started digging with gusto because of the all the mortars. Then the next thing I know the captain comes over to me and says, ‘We intend to fight here and not in China.’” Brennan laughs when he recalls the story but then his smile fades. “I’m sad to say that he was killed three days later.

“That was my first experience in ground combat. I was green, but I learned fast. My younger brother had told me about combat and he warned me that because of all the excitement it’s easy to become dehydrated. Because of that I had two canteens on me; one was full of water and the other was full of scotch. Well, I took a mortar wound in my left buttock and when I turned around to look I saw that it had put a big hole in my canteen of scotch.” He smiled as he remembered that day. “A fate worse than death,” he said.

Brennan had been briefed that they’d get in and out as quickly as possible, but he was in heavy fighting for a week. At one point he made it to an aid station and the Army corpsman looked very confused. He told Brennan, “But you were just here.”

Brennan said, ‘No, I wasn’t.’

“The corpsman then looked at some records and said, ‘Oh, it was your brother.’”

Brennan contributes the success of the allies at Normandy to Adolf Hitler. “He was the best general we ever had,” he said.

“Hitler was convinced that our main invasion was going to be aimed at Calais. Because of that he didn’t release his Panzers at Normandy until it was too late. Had he released them when Rommel wanted them, it would have been another story.”

Holland

“It was my Waterloo.”

“D-Day there was supposed to be Dec. 17, 1944, but we were told we weren’t needed. Instead, we flew in on Dec. 18 and the Germans were waiting.”

Towed in below 500 feet with visibility of less than a half mile, Brennan was carrying three men and a jeep and was scheduled to land at Zon. What he didn't know was that they were about 25 miles off course.

"We were all alone in the sky and then the C-47 pilot notified me that we were off course," Brennan said. "And then we started taking flak. We flew right over a small caliber battery and we started taking hits all over the glider. They punctured the gas tank of the jeep and there was gas everywhere... And then the German got our range."

The events of that day then tragically unfolded for Brennan. One shot hit blew off part of his foot and destroyed the rudder pedal. Another ripped through his hand. With gas sloshing at his feet, Brennan prayed that they wouldn't take an incendiary. His prayers weren't answered.

"Well, we took one and the whole front end of the glider exploded," he said. "I took massive burns to my face and eyes. I was scared as hell and hoped that the outside controls wouldn't burn off because then we'd be in serious trouble."

"And then the C-47 pilot yelled, 'Hang on! Hang on! We shouldn't be far from Zon.'" That was their last communication.

Another shot came up through the pilot and co-pilot seat. Another shot shattered Brennan's jaw. One of the men, Sergeant Thompson, was wounded in the groin.

"I could only see out of one eye then," Brennan said. "I only had one hand and one foot and was losing consciousness." Struggling to stay alert, he hit the release and separated the glider from the C-47. He then began the difficult task of taking his glider down into enemy territory.

"We landed in a small field and the wings were torn right off the glider," Brennan said. "And we immediately starting taking fire from a small arms patrol."

Two of the men helped Brennan into a ditch and when he looked up, he saw Thompson standing near the glider examining his wound. He also saw the German patrol coming around the other end of the glider. Brennan yelled at Thompson, who under fire, finally made it to the ditch. When he got there he said, "I wanted to see if this hurrying was worthwhile."

As the battle waged, the four men realized that they were running low on ammunition.

"Then all of a sudden, Thompson starts crawling toward the jeep, and I thought, 'He's got guts. He's going to get the ammo.'" But when he got back he had his mandolin. His mandolin! I couldn't believe it. But then he did go back for the ammo.

"The other two men were just kids and one of them bandaged up me and Thompson. I had maps so I gave them to the kids and pointed them toward the landing zone. They took fire on the way out, but they got away."

After the two young men got away, a strange thing happened. The Germans, most likely thinking that all the Americans had gotten away, set their weapons down and started looting the glider. They never saw Brennan and Thompson creep out of the ditch behind them.

"I shot into the ground first because I didn't want to shoot them in the back," Brennan said. "Then we dropped every one of them."

From there, they made it to a barn owned by Dutch-Nazi sympathizers. A woman brought them out hot milk but also sent her son to notify the Germans that they were there.

"A German captain and sergeant came and took our weapons and questioned us. The captain spoke excellent English. He had attended school in Detroit and was a Detroit Tigers fan. He used his own handkerchief to bandage the wound in my chest. He told Thompson that I didn't have long to live and that when I died he should give himself up. He then left. Well, I didn't have any plan of dying."

Brennan then passed out. Later he awoke from a kick to the ribs and someone stomping on his bad hand. When he opened his eyes he saw a German officer with the dreaded SS insignia

on his collar.

“Hitler had said some time before that all paratroopers, commandos, rangers, and glider pilots were to be considered terrorists and therefore did not fall under the rules of the Geneva Convention. They could be killed on sight. But we also knew only the SS followed that. And here was one before me.”

The SS officer knelt in front of Brennan and spoke in a thick English. He began insulting America when Brennan spit in his face.

The SS officer quickly stood up and kicked him in the head, fracturing his skull and knocking him unconscious.

Brennan woke to Thompson shaking him. He told him that the SS officer had left but had stationed two guards outside the door. He also said that the guards would murder them in the morning.

“Thompson said, ‘I’ve got two knives. I’ll take one and you take the other.’”

They took care of the guards and then crawled across the street. In short time, they again met other Dutch, but these were allied sympathizers.

“They put us in the back of a horse-drawn cart. They put a blanket over us and then put cow manure over that.”

They were stopped three times. The last time an SS guard stood over the manure and jammed his bayonet down into the back. One time it grazed Brennan’s boot. From there, he passed out.

“I woke up in an elevator where they were taking me to surgery,” he said. The doctor who spoke very good English said, “You’re in a bad way.”

After the surgery he was put in a 12-bed ward. The 11 other beds were all occupied by pregnant women.

“Two of the women were wives of German officers,” Brennan said, “so I was told not to speak any English.”

For most of the six weeks that Brennan was there, he was disguised as a pregnant woman. The Germans came through the hospital every day, but they never suspected anything. Through all this time, the shelling continued around them.

“One round hit the building and killed two of the pregnant women and one of the nuns. It also set my bed on fire. One time the roof was hit and a piece fell in and broke my nose.”

When the Brits liberated the town, Brennan was taken to a hospital in Belgium. Soon after he left he learned that a bomb had hit the hospital ward that he’d stayed in, killing or injuring everyone.

From Belgium he was sent to Paris for five days and then on to the 83rd Hospital in England. There he received extensive plastic surgery for the burns on his face. And from there, he was finally sent home.

“We went home by ship, and that was the scariest part of the war. The ship we were on used to be a luxury liner but the Coast Guard made it a troop transport. It was so fast that we went without escorts, but it was a very bumpy ride.”

They also carried with them German prisoners of war. Some of the older prisoners worked as mess stewards during the trip. But the SS all worked as garbage men.

As the ship sailed into New York Harbor, Brennan was on deck with a German prisoner.

“What is this?” the German asked.

“It’s New York,” Brennan told him.

“But that’s impossible,” said the German. Nazi propagandist Goebbels had told them that the entire U.S. east coast had been destroyed.

“I don’t think so,” said Brennan. “I don’t think so.”

Brennan wanted to stay in the Air Force, but was medically retired. He went back to school, got a degree and then went to work for the Air Force as a civilian. He then went to Washington DC where he served as the Director of Personnel for the Department of Defense. He retired in 1977 after faithfully serving his country for 38 years. He's a happy man now, married for more than 50 years. But there are times he remembers the war. Whenever he passes by a cowfield, he thinks back to when he was in that cart in Holland. He thinks about the SS. He thinks about the bayonet coming down around him.

Looking back, Brennan does have a few regrets. He regrets that glider pilots never received the respect they deserved.

"Gliders and pilots were expendable as far as some commanders were concerned," he said. And through the war, 99 percent of all glider pilots never received a promotion. Far below the average of aircraft pilots."

But Brennan doesn't regret serving during the war. And for some its hard to understand why he feels that way. One of his brothers was paralyzed at the Battle of the Bulge. One brother-in-law died in a POW camp and another lost a foot. Between the three brothers and two brothers-in-law, there were almost 30 purple hearts between them.

But these men came from a different era. A time when a dictator had taken over Europe and was threatening to take over the world. A time of turmoil. A time when a man served his country because it was something he believed in and something he had to do. He served for the greater good and because he knew he was fighting the good fight.

"Yes, our family took a lickin' during that war," Brennan said. "But everyone of us would do it all over again."